

## **John Sharp's Legacy**

The scene was again all too familiar; yet another untouchable mustang. But this situation was a bit more complicated. The last handler was the grandson of one of the finest horsemen of the last century . . . none other than John Sharp of Prineville, Oregon.

John and I had met eight years earlier when he was eighty-four years young. I'd witnessed John Sharp taming wild horses- mustangs, with merely a length of bamboo pole. And as we worked side by side he was getting three horses gentled to my one! Most importantly they remained calm, most of them, throughout the entire process. In a half day I was completely in awe of this master of horsemanship and threw my antiquated techniques overboard to embrace his evolved approach.

Today thousands of wild horses are gentled using John's highly successful sequence that begins with a simple twelve foot length of bamboo. Today professional horsemen, inmates, and novices alike have adopted Sharp's sixty year old approach that quickly and humanely has wild horses trusting the human to the point of touching, handling, and leading typically in less than two hours. And now after applying this method for the past seven years, my personal challenge has evolved to accomplish this without the horse ever breaking into a sweat. In fact I am so taken with this process that I have produced a video on this remarkable success. It is called *Pole Gentling the Wild Horse*. Link: [http://www.horsewhisperer.com/horse\\_training\\_videos.htm#Pole](http://www.horsewhisperer.com/horse_training_videos.htm#Pole). And I give thanks to my friend John Sharp every single time one of these videos goes out he door knowing this is the most humane and expedient approach to this delicate and exceedingly dangerous challenge.

### **On With the Story**

I arrived at John and Joyce Sharp's ranch just before Thanksgiving in the year 2005. Our friendship of eight years brought me to this welcome doorstep anytime I was within reasonable driving distance. With a couple days off between clinics in Oregon and Washington, this was like coming home. With two horse friends in tow we descended upon John Sharp's Corral- the name of the ranch, about mid-afternoon on a very raw early winter day. This typically arid country was socked in with an inversion that felt like being trapped in a frigid cloud. It was truly a bone-chilling afternoon and the warmth of the Sharp household was like a warm and welcome blanket.

John, ninety-two and on oxygen permanently, was his jolly and gregarious self. His bride Joyce, decades his junior gave me a hearty hug as the three of us entered the cozy house. There was an aura of peace and well-being that just pervaded the ranch. The animals were all friendly and as inviting as John and Joyce. It always felt right to be with these quality folks.

It wasn't long before we heard about an untouchable mustang that had recently been in a wreck with their grandson Brandon. Knowing full well that my friends Bob Claymier and Chas Frame would cherish their time with master-horseman John Sharp, I volunteered to

help Joyce feed the critters and we exited back into the bitter cold dreary day. As we walked down to the arena where the tractor and hay wagon awaited, we came upon the subject horse. A stout sorrel horse of about 14-1 with a couple white sox, the horse bolted into the far corner as we approached. He was a nervous horse ready to jump right out of his skin at any provocation.

“That’s the one that got away from Brandon and ran all the way back to Pete’s place a mile away. By the time Cinder got there the saddle was pretty well destroyed. Brandon hasn’t been able to get a hand on him since. Think you can help him out Frank,” Joyce asked?

“Sure Joyce. I’m a bit rusty with the wild ones. Haven’t done it in a year or so. You may have to do a little coaching and help me out, but I’ll just bet we can get this pieced back together,” I replied with a well-covered hint of anguish underneath my words.

I’d had a similar situation about twenty hours earlier with another wiggled out horse that others had failed with. My heart had been in my throat for a good hour and a half with this rangy and very jumpy quarter horse of three years. But I’d succeeded reasonably well and the horse had come a long long way in that time. At fifty-five years of age I asked myself what in God’s name I was doing getting into these highly dangerous situations. When would I grow up?

Joyce and I fed their colorful lot of horses that were mostly paints of black and white persuasion. Their famous stallion Red Deck had sired 100’s of successful offspring. He was a striking tobiano of twenty years who just in the last years was beginning to show his age and slow down a bit. But today he strutted around his domain like a peacock in front of an admiring female. The pen itself was impressive and constructed of massive six inch round metal piping painted a soft green that had faded with the years of harsh elements typical of this region. Now this was a pen truly fit for John’s special horse.

The end of the day was quickly darkening as we walked back to the cozy house to find John spinning yarns for my friends. Chas and Bob were just soaking it all in while encouraging John’s willing participation. And John Sharp could spin a yarn to beat em all. John had more stories in his psyche and experience of eighty+ years with horses than probably any person alive today, seriously. And he had the memory of an elephant. He could recall names, dates, and details from six, seven, and even eight decades earlier as he recalled riding freight trains during the depression and wrangling horses fresh off the open range. His memories were fascinating and accurate and descriptive way beyond my own short experience of a mere twenty years. This man had taught me volumes in the years I’d known him. To be taken seriously by him as a horseman is my greatest accolade.

Chas had to catch a plane out of Portland that evening so bid his farewell. Bob and I later shared a wonderful meal with the Sharps that evening and retired early after a long day of travel.

## **Brandon's Story**

Brandon was a bright athletic articulate man in his mid-twenties who had signed on for a year of helping care for his aging grandfather. He was living in the bunkhouse next door and welcomed us into his quarters after dinner. As Bob settled on the sofa-bed and I on the floor for the night, we became acquainted with this engaging prodigy. Brandon had grown up with horses, and then drifted toward the bright lights of the city as so many kids do. Now he was back on the ranch helping the grandfather he loved and respected. And Brandon was fearless. He had absolutely no idea how quickly it could all turn from a calm situation into an out of control wreck. He was tight and fit and built like a linebacker and wreaked a "bring it on" attitude. We jawed for awhile then turned down the heat and settled in for a restful night in the cozy bunkhouse.

The sound of the feed tractor putting by woke us to another morning of heavy fog and bitter cold. Brandon had promised homemade biscuits and gravy and we all settled at the dining table for a hearty breakfast and great conversation. It was then agreed that John and I would move onto our other pastime, playing cards as Brandon braved the cold and caught the mustang.

John and I had a history of horses, cards, and once in awhile a dollop of Black Velvet after finishing with the horses. This morning it was coffee with a dollop of crème. I arranged the cribbage board and John then proceeded to pull one of his come-from-behind acts and beat me in the home stretch. This was not uncommon. His aged arthritic hands made card handling difficult so I arranged the cards and handed them to him. I did all the shuffling and dealing as he watched me closely.

"I've got to keep a close eye on you at all times Frank," he chided as I deftly handled the cards.

"Well I need every advantage in my favor when playing with a card shark like you," I smiled back. We just loved to rib each other when it came to cards. Then in walked Brandon, with the halter in hand. Not a good sign.

His demeanor was one of frustration.

"What's going on out there Grandson," asked John with a tinge of humor to soften that attitude?

"I can only get so close before he bolts off. He just won't have anything to do with the halter the moment I reach for him. I mean he is really freaked out. And it's really cold out there. I gotta warm up a bit. Hey Granddad it's time for your morning cocktail anyway. You guys can keep playing cards. Who's winning anyway," Brandon asked as he softened his frustrated demeanor.

Brandon fixed John's immunizer with his medications and John puffed away at it like a cigar as we moved on to our next favorite game, one called pitch. This was a faster game,

though a bit more complicated and I had to refresh John's memory on the details. He caught on like a fox in the hen-house and gave me a real whooping that first game. I rebounded soundly in the second, and then we proceeded onto the tie-beaker. And it was right down to the nitty-gritty, nip and tuck right to the finish, as one more time John Sharp slipped across the finish line just ahead of me. I moaned and groaned as he gloated something about "giving Sonny anther lesson." It was all in good fun and I was now ready to face the wild horse that couldn't be caught.

Joyce and I watched as Brandon attempted to halter the jittery animal. Just as soon as he reached out to actually touch the horse, off he bolted to the other end of the 20' x 40' paddock. His comfort was the other end, the muddy area close to horses on the other side of the massive lodge-pole fence. The slippery mud was downright dangerous and I wasn't about to attempt to handle this sketched-out animal in that part of the pen. I shook my head. So often we are handicapped by our environment when handling horses. But there weren't a lot of choices today and it was real cold and I had to get down the road. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving and I was headed up toward Seattle later in the day.

"I think it's time for the pole Frank," Joyce suggested.

"You want to do it Joyce," I slipped out with a little hope she might take me up on this generous invitation?

"No. He's way too quick for me," was Joyce's simple reply.

Joyce handed me the twelve foot pole and I eased into the pen, trying to maintain a non-threatening stature. Thunder hightailed it down to the far end into the mud and watched my slow approach with trepidation. This horse just didn't want to deal with humans anymore. I offered the pole and after about thirty seconds he reached his nose out and took an investigative sniff.

"He's been poled before Frank," Joyce informed me.

Wasting no time, I calmly lifted the pole over his head and then back behind him with no reaction, so I placed the pole firmly onto the horse's withers. Then after maybe twenty seconds I began working the pole back and forth, first on his neck, then up his mane almost to his ears, then back down into the saddle area and to the dock of his tail. He was completely at ease with all this and before long I was rubbing his back and rump vigorously with the end of the pole. He didn't really melt into my touch as I'd hoped, but he sure handled it well, so I began to ease in closer. That was all it took to send him spurting off, mud a flying right into the corner where he slipped and almost fell, then raced to the other end into the three sided shed up near the gate.

"Whew, he sure is explosive," I commented.

"He's a hot one Frank. He's a fifteen year old that Rick and Kitty gentled sometime ago on contract from BLM. They took on a bunch of older horses and got them gentled down

pretty well and most adopted. But this guy was just too explosive for the adaptors, so we ended up with him. He's not too bad once you get a halter on him though."

I followed him up into the shed and blocked his exit while trying to settle him with a soothing tone.

"Easy big fella. Eaaaaaasy now," I cooed over and over as much in an attempt to settle myself. These explosive horses could run you over instantly with the least provocation. I zipped my coat a little higher and with the sound of that noise, he shot past me in a flash as my heart took a serious leap. He could have kicked my head off, had that been his intention. My heart raced wildly. Why was I doing this?

"He is just so hyper sensitive. Always been like this," I inquired of either Joyce or Brandon?

"He's definitely worse since the accident. I used to be able to walk right up and halter him, no problem," Brandon filled me in.

"I think we'll need the cotton rope about now, don't you Joyce?"

"Yep. I'll run and get it," Joyce said as she hurried up to the tack room. Joyce wanted a success here while she had me helping out. I pushed Thunder back into the shed as Joyce returned with a thirty foot length of half inch cotton rope.

"Put a clove hitch on the end with about three feet of rope hanging off the end," Joyce reminded me. I deftly tied the clove on the end, proud of myself for remembering my Boy Scout days and that knot, especially in front of knot expert Joyce.

Thunder was still in the shed adjacent to the gate and I deftly approached him with the pole and rope. He didn't seem disturbed when I rubbed the rope on his side, then over the other side and worked it back and forth. But I'd tied the knot too tight and it wouldn't come loose as I worked it on his withers. This didn't bother the horse, but I wasn't able to keep the progress, so lifted it off his back and loosened up the knot. This time I was able to slip the knot off the end and with a couple tries push enough rope to the off side so that a small pile of rope gathered on the ground. This allowed me to lower the pole and pull the excess rope toward me v e r y s l o w l y. I did not want to alarm the horse for any reason and have him jet off again, especially with ropes and poles in this confining space.

"Eeeeeeeeeasy Thunder," I repeated over and over. And for some reason he believed me and stayed still enough to gather the rope, discard the pole, and begin sawing the cotton rope lightly on his neck. Great. Back and forth. Up and down his neck I sawed all the while reassuring him in as calm a tone as I could muster. Believe me; my heart was in my throat. Then walking out to the end of the rope with both ends in my hand I gave a slight cluck and tiny bit of pressure and this super charged wild horse walked calmly out of the shed behind me.

“You sure were right about him settling once a rope is on him. What a huge change,” I commented, completely surprised. I led him over to the gate and gathered my halter/lead combo and arranged it so I wouldn’t be fumbling around when the time came. Back into the shed we walked and then turned to face outside so he would feel less constricted. If he needed to leave I wanted him to have an easy exit. There was an old steel bath tub in the corner that just shouted out danger. I began stroking his withers and neck and cooing my soothing song over and over as I rubbed the halter on his neck, then reached over his neck and passed the end back to myself over his neck. He shook in fear, but didn’t leave. I offered the nose loop and he avoided it turning his nose away toward the off side. We played this game for a very long minute before I found his nose and was able to tie off the end. Success and big relief.

I moved out in front and to the side as I wasn’t too excited about being run over and he darted right out into the paddock, hit the end of the lead and ran a good half dozen high-speed circles around me. But he wasn’t pulling away so I began winding him down, like a snail and eventually got a hand on his side to comfort him and help Cinder get stopped. Success!

### **Into the Indoor Arena**

A short distance from Thunder’s paddock was a small indoor arena connected to a serious round pen. This was a perfect place to continue Cinder’s education. Brandon juggled a couple horses and Cinder and I entered the arena. Cinder was all wide-eyed as he took in the confines of this old building, but he wasn’t one to settle easily. The stroking and settling procedures that had served me so well with so many horses did little to settle this hyped up horse. With his boundless energy I decided to put him to work and try to use it constructively with the sixth exercise of my program, the one called *Ballet on the Ground*. . Driving Cinder in a circle, and then asking him to face up and head out the opposite direction as least had him using his boundless stamina. After about a dozen changes and dust heavily permeating the air, he seemed to relax a bit. I tied him to a heavy beam along the wall and the three of us exited to breathe some fresh air and allow the dust to settle.

“I’d like to get him saddled and then break for lunch. He can carry the saddle around for awhile and get relaxed about it. Sound like a good plan,” I suggested?

“I’m hungry Frank. So yes, let’s do that,” answered Brandon as Joyce nodded her approval.

Brandon had saddled Cinder a good many times so I was happy to watch him take over that part. And the horse handled it fairly well. Both parties remained calm and once the cinch was secured, I took over. My favorite settling exercise is slapping the saddle with the lead as the horse moves around in a circle quietly. This is the final test I require of all horses before mounting- every single time! If a horse is goosey or has a propensity to buck, this exercise usually reveals the hole. I began with a light tapping with the lead and almost instantly Cinder shot forward. This only told me that I would have to start much

lower on the V. After settling him down I started anew, this time stroking his neck with my left hand and patting the saddle with my right. Time after time I began light and built until he was bothered, then backed off and comforted him as we returned to home base. Within about ten minutes he was actually walking around me and handling the lead hitting the saddle. This was a good place to leave him so I led him outdoors into the round pen and removed the halter. Time for lunch.

### **A Nice Long Break for Lunch**

The warmth of the house was so welcome to the three of us and the good hot meal as well. We took our time about returning to Cinder, giving him plenty of time to chill. John had to give me another lesson in cards and a couple coffees warmed us to the point of being ready to face the music again.

I'm a great believer in what I call *passive training*. Leaving a horse saddled, preferably able to move is an example of this. Hanging plastic bags where horses live, over their food and water is another example. Tarps on the ground in front of feeders or waters help horse learn to tolerate life. In the meantime we're doing other things as the horse is working through these challenges.

So Cinder was being trained while we were eating and warming up.

Finally the moment of truth couldn't be avoided any longer and I had miles to cover before dark, so Brandon and I walked back to the round pen. I hung back and encouraged Brandon to halter the horse, but Cinder wasn't too interested in that.

"Okay Brandon, time to fish for a mustang," I announced as I handed him the pole and cotton rope. He had watched me closely earlier and very deftly did the same. In no time Brandon had the rope over Cinder's neck and was leading him. I helped secure the halter and again worked *Ballet on the Ground*. I worked Cinder through the slapping of the lead on the saddle as he relaxed into that exercise. Preferring to use a snaffle bit for the actual riding, Cinder accepted the bit well. I drove him off in each direction and wound him back down to a stop several times on each side before I was sufficiently satisfied that the horse was ready.

"You ready to ride this renegade Brandon?"

Brandon nodded eagerly and I helped steady the horse for a half mounting and wound the horse down to a stop several times in each direction with Brandon lying over the saddle. Then the moment of truth was upon us as Brandon mounted. The horse was nervous but didn't melt down and we immediately reassured Cinder by asking his head to come to each side while standing. I then coached Brandon as he performed one rein stops in each direction until it was reasonably smooth for all parties, and then backed off and let him ride the horse. Cinder was uncertain and very impulsive, starting and stopping abruptly.

“Push him right through those abrupt stops so he comes down slow and rational,” I instructed.

Brandon caught on fast and began pushing the horse with his whole body and pelvis, getting into sync with the horse’s rhythm.

“Now reach forward and knead those withers while hanging onto the reins. This will settle both of you,” I instructed.

Before long the two were making smooth transitions up and down. This seemed like a good place to exit but not before leaving Brandon with specific instructions about subsequent rides and thorough ground work.

I walked back to the bunk house and organized my gear, then reported to Joyce and John before bidding a farewell. But I just had to take one last peek at the team of two in the round pen. They were moving smoothly with grace and confidence as I drove by and got turned around. I stopped the car and rolled down the window.

“Brandon, it’s been a pleasure working with you. You have everything it takes to succeed with Cinder and if you can turn him into a confident riding horse, well you’ll be a whole lot closer to being the horseman your Granddad is, because this is one challenging horse. Get through this one and you, my friend are a horseman!”

---

Frank Bell and his accredited instructors have been helping horses with their people problems for several decades. Frank writes interesting stories about these horses and their challenges. He also helps people better understand how to communicate with these magnificent creatures by answering their challenging questions on his website. Frank has designed a logical sequence of exercises that immediately places both parties on higher ground . . . without the need for a round pen. Suddenly both parties are riding in confidence instead of fear. ***Frank Bell’s 7-Step Safety System*** has been featured in horse magazines and ezines throughout the world including a three-part series in *Western Horseman* magazine. Frank’s foundation video “Discover the Horse You Never Knew” fully outlines “the system” and is available in the audio/video library that includes twelve works. Join Frank Bell’s Gentle Solution Revolution and breakthrough your training barriers now!

**[WWW.HORSEWHISPERER.COM](http://WWW.HORSEWHISPERER.COM)**  
**800-871-7635**

